

Journal of Humanistic Mathematics

Volume 10 | Issue 1

January 2020

John Cheever's Story "The Geometry of Love"

Robert Haas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Mathematics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Haas, R. "John Cheever's Story "The Geometry of Love"," *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, Volume 10 Issue 1 (January 2020), pages 4-21. DOI: 10.5642/jhummath.202001.03 . Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/vol10/iss1/3>

©2020 by the authors. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License.

JHM is an open access bi-annual journal sponsored by the Claremont Center for the Mathematical Sciences and published by the Claremont Colleges Library | ISSN 2159-8118 | <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/>

The editorial staff of JHM works hard to make sure the scholarship disseminated in JHM is accurate and upholds professional ethical guidelines. However the views and opinions expressed in each published manuscript belong exclusively to the individual contributor(s). The publisher and the editors do not endorse or accept responsibility for them. See <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/policies.html> for more information.

John Cheever's Story "The Geometry of Love"

Robert Haas

Cleveland Heights, Ohio, 44112, USA
rhaas3141@yahoo.com

Abstract

Though John Cheever was a leading writer of short fiction, his story "The Geometry of Love" has received little prior literary or mathematical comment. In this essay it is read, against the background of Cheever's own troubled life and marriage, as a Don Quixote-like search, explicitly following the model of Euclidean geometry, and at times wildly funny, for an ideal world of truth and happiness.

John Cheever (1912-1982) (see Figure 1) was one of the top writers of his time, especially of short fiction. He published 180 stories, 120 alone in *The New Yorker*, and his collected *The Stories of John Cheever* won the 1978 Pulitzer Prize. He also wrote five novels, of which the first, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), won the National Book Award, and the second, *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964), won the William Dean Howells Medal from the Academy of Arts and Letters as the best American novel of the previous five years.¹ The present essay focuses on Cheever's story "The Geometry of Love," originally published January 1, 1966, in the *Saturday Evening Post*, which has received little prior commentary. With literary critics perhaps finding any connection of geometry to love too esoteric or absurd to credit, and mathematical commentators perhaps lacking the literary background for full appreciation, the story seems to me never to have been properly understood.²

¹Cheever story citations are from [4] or, for *New Yorker* stories not in this collection, from [16]. Cheever biographical information is from the Bailey chronology in [4], and the biographies [9, 6, 1].

²Bailey terms the story a "rabidly misogynistic satire", which Cheever's *New Yorker* editor William Maxwell, who rejected it, viewed as "positive proof that Cheever was 'losing his powers' because of alcohol" [1, pages 364-365]. Donaldson says "The basic idea—



Figure 1: Is she going to believe his latest yarn? John Cheever and his wife Mary, in 1969. Photo by David Gahr / Estate of David Gahr, published with permission.

1. Background: Cheever’s Life and Art

Cheever generally functioned socially in a cloud of charm and improvised yarns, for instance in the way he secured his Italian maid Iole Felici. In 1956, buoyed by a grant, a sale of film rights, awards for his stories, and the satisfaction of completing his first novel, Cheever set out with his family to spend a year in Italy. They did not speak Italian. They needed to find an apartment, and schools for the children Ben, 8, and Susan, 13; Cheever’s wife Mary was several months pregnant. Then Iole arrived for an interview. “I Cheever hanno bisogno di me”—“The Cheevers need me”—she declared [1, page 234], and she took over, working for them for the next quarter century, eventually even breaking her own long marriage engagement to follow them back to America.

that Euclidean geometry can ameliorate a bad marriage—is preposterous, and . . . the episodes are strung together with a conspicuous lack of coherence” [9, page 223]. Susan Cheever in [6] (which has no index) does not appear to mention the story at all; it is likewise not mentioned in the O’Hara survey [17] of Cheever’s short fiction. From the mathematicians, Kasman gives just a one-paragraph synopsis [12], and Gough just the inaccurate half sentence: “. . . this simply mentions geometry as a hobby of the central character” [10].

Cheever, described as "a story-making machine" [9, page 1], came by his art early. In grade school already he was running puppet theaters and making up stories for the class—"he made them as suspenseful as possible so the teacher would forget to resume her lesson" [4, page 1008]. By age 11 he declared his aim to become a writer. His family had read him all of Dickens already as a child; by his teens he himself engaged in vast precocious reading: Proust, Joyce, and the poetry of Yeats, Eliot, Donne, the Romantics, and the Elizabethans [20].

Like any number of brilliant people, the adolescent Cheever did not fit well into school.³ Enrolled in a prep school that groomed students for Harvard, he was "sloppy about punctuation, . . . didn't take well to discipline" [9, page 36], and ended up with C's and C minuses in English, while flunking math, algebra, and French. A year off in a public high school yielded a similar record: 55 in English, 45 in French, 0 in Latin, and 63 (higher than his others!) in plane geometry.⁴ Cheever was expelled from the prep school in the second term of his junior year, and never went back for more formal education. Instead he wrote a fictionalized account of the incident, "Expelled," which editor Malcolm Cowley accepted for publication in the *New Republic*, saying "I felt that I was hearing for the first time the voice of a new generation" [1, page 47].

That voice took much work and time to develop fully: Cheever omitted fifty of his *New Yorker* stories, published 1935-1947, as not worth including among his collected stories. But his work at its peak, in stories like "The Country Husband," "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," or "The Swimmer,"

³Other gifted teenagers who collided with school mathematics include G. H. Hardy, who stayed in his system but changed his coach: "In his first term at Trinity, Hardy found himself caught in this system. He was to be trained as a racehorse, over a course of mathematical exercises which at nineteen he knew to be meaningless . . . After considering changing his subject to history, he had the sense to find a real mathematician to teach him" [21, page 23]. And, from the side of young verbal genius, there is Emily Dickinson, who attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary for one year at age 16 but then did not return: "Emily was never floored. When the Euclid examination came and she had never studied it, she went to the blackboard and gave such a glib exposition of imaginary figures that the dazed teacher passed her with the highest marks" [13, Volume 1, page 13].

⁴Cheever's mathematical ineptness had real-world consequences: His repeated failure of the mathematical part of the officer candidate's exam later kept him from becoming an officer when he was in the army [15, page 9].

conveys the impression of almost limitless richness of incident and detail. Much as a great photograph shows the depth and beauty in the visual world that an ordinary viewer otherwise overlooks, so in Cheever's fiction, its "sympathetic irony well-seasoned with sadness" [2, page 2277], the power of his imagination piling one improbable incident onto another reveals the wonders that his characters, whether they accept them or not, have available in their "ordinary" lives.

Cheever's work also reflects larger sociopolitical tensions of his time, as members of his Wapshot family from the little town of St. Botolph's, reflecting his own conservative upbringing and Thornton-Wilder-*Our Town* nostalgia for America's rural past, inevitably collide with modern science, progress, and threatened nuclear war. "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow" (the title story for one of Cheever's books) centers on the human and moral issues involved in owning a suburban bomb shelter. Coverly Wapshot, a lowly "taper and preprogrammer" at the Talifer Missile Research and Development site, by a computer error ends up as a speechwriter for the head of the site, a scientific genius-monster who is consciously working towards all-out nuclear war, and a decade before had abused his little son into idiocy.⁵

Given the improbability of events in his work, Cheever has little concern for plausible causality: 1) In *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, criminals and politicians get rich by turning a beautiful pond into a garbage dump, murdering the environmentalist who tries to stop them. Yet a woman, by contaminating three jars of teriyaki sauce with ant poison and threatening to do more, halts the dumping at once. 2) In *Bullet Park*, Tony Nailles, disabled by depression, doesn't get out of bed for twenty-two days, despite visits from his family doctor, a psychiatrist, and a sleep specialist. But he is quickly cured by a swami burning sandalwood and chanting "Love, Love, Love..." 3) The climax/conclusion of *Falconer* is that the convict hero escapes from jail by zipping himself up in place of the corpse in a body bag. 4) In "Town House III," a chemist, infatuated by an upper-class woman who then hu-

⁵It is a pity Cheever did not create a less cartoonish mad scientist villain. One might welcome imaginative reconstructions of the minds of people like the actual Manhattan project leader J. Robert Oppenheimer, who, seeing the first nuclear explosion, thought of Sanskrit poetry: "I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds" [18, page 44]. Or of mathematician David Hilbert, whose little son Franz's mental defect made anything the boy learned quickly fade away ([19, pages 123-124]; but also see [19, pages 138-139, 210]).

miliates him, regains his composure and love for his own wife by reading thermodynamics.

While the *New Yorker* gave Cheever many decades of welcome audience and income, its general limitation to realistically observed upper-middle-class characters, in sharply etched, quickly-resolved predicaments, eventually restricted his artistic growth. Considering his facility, it took him an extraordinary time and number of attempts to produce his first novel, and his novels have peculiar features. For instance, the first chapter of *The Wapshot Scandal* introduces around three-dozen characters; and the leading characters of *Bullet Park* are named Hammer and Nailles, and live in the bizarrely-named suburb Bullet Park. There is some question whether Cheever ever achieved a regular novel, with realistic, developing characters and motivations, as opposed to merely a loosely joined string of striking, quirky sketches and episodes.

Several personal factors strongly affected Cheever's life and may be read as background elements in "Geometry of Love." The first is his marriage (which lasted over 40 years, to the end of his life). His wife Mary (see Figure 1) was a remarkable person too—witty, educated, a gifted published poet. She sustained her marriage for loyalty, for the sake of her children, and for the feeling that she was "taking care of an important creative person" [1, page 440]. But when she started teaching college English in 1962—her students "worshiped her"—it gave her new poise and confidence, Cheever felt threatened and estranged, his infidelities multiplied, and the marriage went into a downward spiral, with cycles of vicious arguments and reconciliations that their daughter compared to the histrionics of grand opera ([9, page 196], [6, pages 47–49 and 159–160]). At Cheever's insistence his wife consulted a psychiatrist, who, after talking to her, asked to see them both together, then explained that it was the *husband Cheever* who was "neurotic, . . . , narcissistic, egocentric, friendless, and so deeply involved in [his] own defensive illusions that [he] had invented a manic-depressive wife" [1, page 393].

Much exacerbating Cheever's problems was his drinking, which had roots in both nature and nurture: his grandfather, father, brother, and daughter all also struggled with alcoholism; his daughter reported that her grandmother had taught her how to make a perfect martini already at age six [7, page 15]. Over a twenty-year period, the window in which Cheever could work before he needed his first drink of the day gradually closed.

Eventually his hands shook so much that it might take him a dozen matches to light a cigarette; he was repeatedly hospitalized with dilated cardiomyopathy, an often fatal heart disease brought on by drinking; only in 1975, after treatment at the Smithers Alcoholism Center in New York City and joining Alcoholics Anonymous, did he overcome the disease. The title poem (sarmonic? despairing?) of his wife's collection "The Need for Chocolate"—"... Your need for chocolate is all in your head./ You think you want it./ You're better off without it. Break the habit."—reminds how much such addictions impact an entire family [5, page 5]. "Geometry of Love," showing a hero who can do no wrong gamely coping with his irrational wife, can be read in part as an alcoholic person's typical pattern of denial of his problems.

The other great hidden factor was Cheever's sexuality. The gay liberation movement was many decades in the future, and his conservative upbringing had inculcated the belief that homosexuality was a perversion if not a crime. So it took a struggle for him to accept that he was in fact bisexual: "My father," wrote Susan Cheever, "was a man with intense and polymorphous appetites that caused him tremendous guilt and self-loathing" [6, page 127]. His verbal talent put him beyond the help of psychiatrists: "... he was too smart for psychiatrists. He had so much quicker a mind, and was verbally so much more sophisticated than they were. He'd talk them up a tree" [9, page 229]. So he had to conduct his struggle alone, by writing in his journals, an estimated 3-4 million words containing much pain. The reader can only hope that Cheever felt better after writing it all down, salute the witty kind public persona, and feel compassion for the man's suffering. It might well be one of the hidden drivers behind the humorously exaggerated devotion of the husband in the "Geometry of Love."

2. "The Geometry of Love"

The story, written in September of 1965, was Cheever's first in over a year; he had been depressed, drinking, and fighting with his wife, an atmosphere perhaps both relieved and reflected in his tale. Their married relationship—"both of us temperamental, quarrelsome and intensely ambitious," Cheever said [2, page 2277]; "my father as the alternately pursuing and rebuffed, resentful male, and my mother as the passive, coerced, resentful female," in their daughter's account [6, page 47]—is likely pictured in Mary Cheever's

wry poem "Two Ducks" [5, pages 37–38], in which the drake's two curled tail feathers are what makes him head of the household: "Two ducks move / In identical grooves . . . Two curled tail feathers / On the drake / With his grander inches make / His elegant only dress / For maleness. / While she leans and squawks her rage / At underwater menace / He maintains the steady pace / And stately carriage / Of marriage."

"The Geometry of Love" falls into six short one-to-three page scenes, as follows.

2.1. *At the Woolworth's 5th Avenue Toy Department*

The story opens with one of the most nastily funny explanations for mother love ever penned. Why should the women throng the toy department so intently? "Why should they sigh so deeply as they fingered the playthings of innocence?" [715]. Maybe because they were now guiltily returning to their own children after spending the afternoon with an illicit lover! Or so the thought occurs to Cheever's protagonist Charlie Mallory, an engineer who happens to observe the crowd as he leaves the hardware department where he had bought a screwdriver to repair his filing cabinet.⁶ One woman is wearing a fur coat resembling the one Mallory had given his wife that Christmas, and, looking more closely, he is surprised to discover it actually is his wife.⁷

⁶Names were important to Cheever, who loved to recall and embroider stories about his ancestors ("Remember you are a *Cheever*" he would tell his son [1, page 5]); who built his novel *Bullet Park* around the confrontation of two main characters Hammer and Nailles (originally de Noailles); and who once wrote that "people named John and Mary never divorce" [1, page 364]. So a little etymological fishing into the name Mallory seems permissible. From the engineering side, it was the name of a major brand of batteries of the time. Does it also recollect Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, that fount of the Arthurian legend underlying the Don Quixote-like aspect, worshipping the unattainable ideal Dulcinea, of Mallory's love for his wife? It could even also be a family joke on the mallard in Mary Cheever's "Two Ducks" poem (if she had already written it by then): The poem ends: "... these two ... Click the lake small / And chock it full / Of noise / Like wooden toys." whereas Mallory's wife ends her visit to the toy department by buying a wooden duck.

⁷Spousal non-recognition is another repeated joke in Cheever's stories. (He complained bitterly how in his own marriage his wife would act for days and weeks on end as if he didn't exist.) In the third episode in "Three Stories" (1973) "an exceptionally good-looking woman" rebuffs her seatmate's every attempt at conversation over their entire nine-hour plane flight. But when they land he joins her in the cab, for "[h]e is her husband, she

“‘Why, Mathilda,’ he cried, ‘what in the world are you doing here?’” [715]. She reacts with rage “operatic” enough to attract attention from the hardware and garden-furniture departments as well as toys: “‘To hound an innocent woman through the streets is the lowest, sickest, and most vile of occupations . . . I am going to leave this store now, and if you follow or harass me in any way, I shall have you arrested by the police and thrown into jail’” [716]!

2.2. *Euclid*

The next scene finds Mallory back in his office, pondering this latest of his many marital misunderstandings. Cheever works to establish two hard-to-credit fundamentals: 1) The husband’s utter blamelessness,⁸ and 2) his unconditional adoration.⁹ “Should he consult a psychiatrist, a marriage counselor, a minister?” wonders Mallory. “Should he jump out of the window? He went to the window with this in mind” [716]. Looking outside, he sees a small truck advertising EUCLID’S DRY CLEANING AND DYEING. Meshing with Mallory’s deep need for “fitness and symmetry,” the observation triggers an idea:

The great name reminded him of the right-angled triangle, the principles of geometric analysis, and the doctrine of proportion for both commensurables and incommensurables. What he needed was a new form of ratiocination, and Euclid might do. If he could make a geometric analysis of his problems, mightn’t he solve them, or at least create an atmosphere of solution? [716-717]

is his wife, the mother of his children, and a woman he has worshipped passionately for nearly thirty years” [816-818].

⁸The eyewitness report from the Cheever marriage is: “I [their son Federico] remember saying, ‘Okay, I’ve got a piece of paper and I’m going to put a black checkmark next to each of you whenever you say something mean to the other one.’” After half an hour he [John Cheever] had about twenty-five checkmarks and she [Mary Cheever] had about three” [1, page 436].

⁹“‘But I *adore* your mother,’ my father would say in a tone of voice that implied only a crazy fool could have doubted this essential truth,” when the children would wonder why their viciously fighting parents didn’t simply get a divorce; “I imagined bringing a divorce lawyer out to their house . . . only to discover them holding hands and giggling like teenagers” [6, page 48].

Taking slide rule in hand, and recalling the theorems that a triangle is isosceles if and only if the opposite angles are equal (Euclid I.5-6), Mallory sets out to make this triangle a mathematical model of his marriage (see Figure 2 below for an illustration). The base is his two children, Randy and Priscilla. "He loved them!" [717]. The "most critical element in Mathilda's line ... was the fact that she had recently taken a phantom lover" [717]. But since this merely involved her dressing up once or twice a week and going to the city for lunch and a movie *alone*, then coming home "emptied," this seemed harmless. The third line of the triangle, representing himself, Mallory knew "would be most prone to miscalculations" [718]. But looking at the situation rationally here, the analysis seems successful: the triangle indeed seems to be isosceles, with a pair of equal sides, and a corresponding pair of equal opposite angles. "Suddenly he felt much less bewildered, happier, more hopeful and magnanimous ... Even Mathilda's angularity seemed touching and lovable" [718]. Further study of Euclid leads Mallory to feel "he had corrected the distance between his reality and those realities that pounded at his spirit" [718]; rude headwaiters, clerks, and traffic policemen lose the power to upset him. "He thought of writing a book about his discovery: *Euclidean Emotion: The Geometry of Sentiment*" [719].

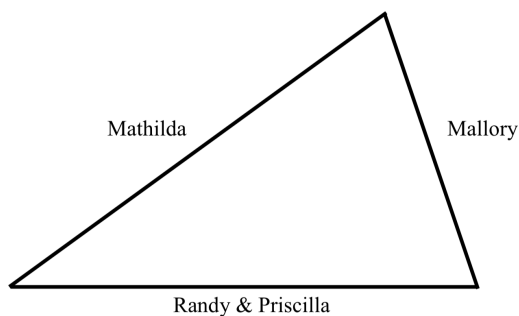


Figure 2: Geometric model of Mallory's marriage.

2.3. Chicago Chaos

Mallory has so far tested his geometric analysis of human happiness only in the restricted context of his own marriage. But a trip to Chicago offers a much expanded scope. By a parallelogram he relieves the gloomy view

from his window (“coffin factory, used car dumps, shanties, weedy playing fields, pigs fattening on acorns, and in the distance the monumental gloom of Gary” [719]). That evening he visits the cartoonishly chaotic household of his friend McGowan: The wife, drink in hand and sobbing, is crawling on the floor putting nametags on the furniture she plans to take along when she divorces him—“I’m not going to leave the s.o.b. a thing” [720]. Her neighbor Mrs. Mitchell stops by, also disheveled from weeping, to say that her husband got drunk and put the children’s kitten in the blender as they were watching. McGowan, unperturbed, says the nametag business happens regularly once or twice a year: his wife knows he fools around, with Mrs. Mitchell among others, but he wouldn’t be true to himself if he weren’t promiscuous. He offers to fix Mallory up with Mrs. Mitchell too, for just ten dollars or a bottle of whiskey; her husband “has this suicide thing,” usually with sleeping pills that they always pump out in time, though once he tried to hang himself . . .

Mallory rushes back to his hotel and, slide rule in hand, starting from “the relation between the volume of a cone and that of its circumscribed prism” [721] (Euclid XII.10), he works past midnight trying to rationalize all this irrational behavior.

2.4. Italian Holiday

Mallory and his wife spend the next ten days enjoying a fine Italian holiday, up to the last day in Rome, when Mathilda suddenly turns moody, lets out a sob, and tells her husband, “You make me sick” [722]. A few hours later, crying, she explains: “No one in this city understands English” [722]. Working out the problems with a slide rule, Mallory concludes from his geometry that “her happiness, as well as his and that of his children, suffered from some capricious, unfathomable, and submarine course of emotion that wound mysteriously through her nature, erupting with turbulence at intervals that had no regularity and no discernible cause” [722]. As with Mary Cheever’s two ducks, only the “irrational” female is squawking!

2.5. Gary, IN, Disappears

The fifth scene is the shortest, just half a page, but conceptually most revealing. Passing Gary, Indiana, while returning on the train from another short trip to Chicago, Mallory repeats the “theorem that had corrected the angle

of his relationship to the Indiana landscape" [723] (i.e. the parallelogram of §2.3), but is then astonished to discover that the city has disappeared: "He had, through some miscalculation, not only rendered Gary powerless; he had lost Gary ... He turned to the woman on his left and asked, 'That's Gary, isn't it?' 'Sure,' she said. 'What's the matter? Can't you see?'"

Mallory, the engineer, had assumed that his work applied geometry, as do physics and engineering, to reshape physical reality. But Gary is decisive proof this is not the case. The outcome depends on the *observer*: to an "objective" observer, the woman on Mallory's left who is not emotionally invested in the experiment, Gary is unchanged. Mallory's work has instead affected his own *perception* of physical reality. He has found a way to use geometry for its psychological effect on himself, where it perhaps acts on his brain in a way similar to such other treatments as alcohol, psychotherapy, or electroshock.

The outcome was not foregone—Mallory's modeling his family by the lines of an isosceles triangle is a priori not that different from Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton successfully modeling the earth, moon, and sun as a triangle of points in space. But the fact that the effect is psychological means that Mallory will have to give up his hopes of "adjusting" his wife Mathilda's angularities: the only way to actually change her would be for her to take up geometry for herself. Modifying himself, though, can make him—indeed has made him—happier, so the method certainly deserves further study. Geometry is cheaper than psychiatric counseling, and leaves less of a hangover than alcohol. Its effect is more targeted: drinking enough alcohol to make Gary disappear would cause a general blackout of all the surroundings too. It seems less severely addictive, though that varies with the user. The greatest concern is the narrow population in whom it could be useful: though low doses of elementary mathematics, as in card games, crossword puzzles, and Sudoku are widely effective, mathematics teachers often find, regretfully, that larger quantities of higher mathematics have a tendency to be ineffective, toxic, or poorly tolerated in the general population.¹⁰

¹⁰At least for its *discoverer* Jean-Victor Poncelet (1788-1867) (writing at first with scraps of charcoal on the wall of his Russian prison cell after the defeat of their invading Napoleonic army), projective geometry has been credited as lifesaving [3, pages 206–217].

2.6. *In the Hospital: The End*

So geometry deserves carefully controlled scientific study. Unfortunately the final scene suggests that Mallory engaged in a program of poorly-planned self-experimentation that proved disastrous. At the beginning of this scene, perhaps a week after the Gary incident, he “was taken sick” [723]—gravely so: Found unconscious on the floor of his office, he was taken in an ambulance to the hospital, operated on, and listed in critical condition. He lost ten inches of his intestinal tract, and it was ten days before he recovered enough to have his wife as his first visitor. What could possibly have brought this all on? It is unfortunate that Cheever’s commentators have seen nothing more than an unconvincing random plot twist. From such a sophisticated writer there is surely more than this. Is it not obvious, reasonable, and logical, that Mallory must have been continuing his experimentation with geometry? The scene later shows one or two further such experiments explicitly, the last one of which ends with Mallory’s death.¹¹

But sufficient to distract the commentators from doing their proper job is the humor, verging on Marx Brothers slapstick, of Mathilda’s invincible self-centered angularity as she visits her husband’s sickroom [723-724]. “Why, you’re looking marvelous,” she exclaims; “I just wish that once in my life I could get into bed for a week or two and be waited on”; “Everything at the house is fine and dandy . . . Nobody seems to miss you.” She takes up a spoonful of his broth to feed him, and “through no fault of her own” spills the bowl over his chest and bedclothes. “It was his Mathilda speaking, his beloved Mathilda, unsparing of herself in displaying that angularity, that legitimate self-interest that no force of love could reason or soften.”

¹¹In illuminating contrast is the classic scientific self-experimentation of Humphry Davy (1778-1829) that uncovered the properties of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) [8]. After making further tests on his distinguished writer friends—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who had just published his “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” reported “great extacy”; future poet laureate Robert Southey, a “thrill all through me” and “a tingling in my toes and fingers, a sensation perfectly new and delightful”—Davy eventually popularized the gas in large public lecture-demonstrations at the Royal Institution in London. Yet in similarly testing lethal carbon monoxide, he was careful enough to stop when three breaths brought him ill effects, concluding that four or five would be fatal.

Cheever’s time saw much experimentation with psychoactive drugs—in the early 1970’s his own older son Ben was using marijuana heavily [1, pages 430-431].

What would Don Quixote be without the disdainful unreachable ideal of his lady Dulcinea always present before his eyes? Or John Cheever, the innocent and perfect lover of his wife Mary?

After Mathilda has left ("I'll tell the children how well you look" [724]) and Mallory's nurse has finished changing his soaked bed and clothes and fed him a second bowl of soup, he asks her "to get the slide rule and notebook out of the pocket of his suit" and he works out "a simple, geometrical analogy between his love for Mathilda and his fear of death" [725], for he realizes that another such visit in his weakened state could be life-threatening. The analogy he studies is well-known—see for example Shakespeare's Sonnet 73: "This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong, / To love that well which thou must leave ere long."—and it seems to help, for on Mathilda's visit the next day "he could hear her and see her, but she had lost the power to confuse" [725].

Mathilda points out that Mallory needs a shave, and, seeing his face then later in the shaving mirror for the first time since his collapse, "he tried to equate the voracity of his appetite, the boundlessness of his hopes, and the frailty of his carcass" [725]. How a finite being can contain its larger, possibly infinite, desires is one of the basic conundrums of human existence. It, too, has often been considered before, for instance in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*: "Nature that fram'd us of four elements, / Warring within our breasts for regiment, / Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds" [14, II.vii.18-20], or Thomas Hardy's "I Look into My Glass": "... But Time, to make me grieve, / Part steals, lets part abide; / And shakes this fragile frame at eve / With throbbings of noontide." [11]. Mallory, trying his geometric method, "reasoned carefully, since he knew that a miscalculation, such as he had made for Gary, would end those events that had begun when Euclid's Dry Cleaning and Dyeing truck had passed under his window" [723]. But it is probably an unsolvable problem, for when his wife gets home she is told that he had passed away.

Mallory, a well-organized engineer, doubtless has paid-up life insurance to protect his family, and his wife Mathilda appears far too "angular" to be much affected emotionally by his death. His incautious research program, in bioscience areas remote from his engineering expertise, had obvious flaws—did he even check whether Gary, IN, eventually came back, or was it lost permanently? why did he experiment alone, rather than having assistants

nearby to try to rescue him if he got into trouble? His initial findings, on using geometry to eliminate unpleasant aspects of life, are intriguing, and would seem to deserve repeating under better-controlled conditions. Any mathematician will understand his motivating feeling, his longing for the perfect world of mathematics: “What did Mallory want? He wanted radiance, beauty, and order . . . Was he wrong to look for definitions of good and evil, to believe in the inalienable power of remorse, the beauty of shame?” [721] In any case, though, he gave up his life trying to adjust himself into compatibility with his beloved Mathilda (whereas Don Quixote, with his squire Sancho Panza nearby to pick him up afterwards, merely got knocked down by a windmill), so Mallory would appear to deserve at least comparable honor and fame.

Afterword

Towards the end of his life Cheever finally had the satisfaction of seeing his work accepted into the literary canon. A defining moment was the 1978 reprinting of his short stories—Cheever himself had advised against it, feeling there would not be enough interest—where he was just one of many who were astonished by the final amount and quality of the work. Later milestones included the reprinting of his complete novels and stories in the “Library of America” series (2009), and publication of his biography (Donaldson (1988); Bailey (2009)), letters (1988), and journals (1991).

Prestigious literary awards he won at this time included nomination to the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1973), Pulitzer Prize (1979), National Book Critics Circle Award (1979), American Book Award (1981), and National Medal for Literature (1983). Both *Time* (1964) and *Newsweek* (1977) featured him in cover stories. And he, the high-school dropout, got great enjoyment from receiving an honorary doctorate from Harvard (1978).

Cheever today is the subject of over 30 literary essays in scholarly peer-reviewed journals in the EBSCO database, and at least ten book-length studies, by Bloom, Bosha, Byrne, Coale, Collins, Hunt, Meanor, Morace, O’Hara, and Waldeland. The essays typically focus on one of the deeper stories—for instance, there are at least eight on “The Swimmer”—whereas “The Geometry of Love” is so specialized that it receives only a cursory half-sentence mention in “Diversions with John Gough” in the *Australian Mathematics Teacher* [10].

But it receives a full one-page analysis in Lynne Waldeland's *John Cheever* (1979) [22], and two pages in Patrick Meanor's comprehensive *John Cheever Revisited* (1995) [15], to which I turn now.

Waldeland [22, page 125] terms "The Geometry of Love" a "weirdly mysterious story," linking it to other better-known Cheever stories with magical unrealistic elements like "The Enormous Radio" (a radio tunes in all the nastiness in the building) or "The Music Teacher" (by playing a piano exercise often enough, a man brings his errant wife to her knees). Waldeland concludes that "The Geometry of Love" is "primarily an entertainment, a fabulous account of the dangers of applying scientific principles too effectively to the human world."

Meanor's book [15] appears in the Twayne's United States Authors Series and "draws on new materials made available since the 1979 publication" of their (Waldeland's) previous Cheever study. Proposing "that John Cheever is a considerably more serious artist than his reputation as the archetypal *New Yorker* writer has allowed," the book analyzes the entire Cheever corpus seriously and in depth, seeking underlying mythic structures like Adam and Eve's fall in the stories. The author works hard, for example, to trace meanings in many of the names of Cheever's characters: He points out, for instance, that the "Geometry of Love" engineer Charlie Mallory has initials cm as in the centimeters on a ruler, revealing his fatally "linear" habit of mind.

"The Geometry of Love" is, as explained above, an unusual story, both as coming very late in Cheever's career, and as arising so directly from his own experience, namely angry disputes in his own marriage. But it includes Cheever's trademark transition from the real to the fabulous (as occurs in his famous stories like "The Country Husband"), as Mallory's new geometric outlook on the world at first seems to let him reshape larger and larger realms of reality into more benign, more reasonable, forms. Mallory first triggers the transition by looking out the window to see the EUCLID'S DRY CLEANING AND DYEING truck. As Meanor explains, for a character to look out a window to glimpse a better world is another Cheever trademark that occurs, for instance, already in his first published story "Expelled." That the fabulous new reality in the end may fail, leaving only the bright memory of hope, is another possible outcome in the world of Cheever's fiction (e.g. in "The Swimmer"), so there is precedent for Mallory's demise too.

Meanor characterizes “The Geometry of Love” as “[o]ne of the most imaginatively developed stories” in the book, but feels that Mallory’s method “of geometrically organizing the confusion and disorder of daily life” is fatally flawed because “[h]is totally linear view of existence cannot abide chance, coincidence, or change.” The attempt to take up the method of EUCLID’S DRY CLEANING AND DYEING must then fail: “Charlie transformed himself into Euclid and attempted to “dry” clean the wet, changing world into abstract theories, and his effort to “dye” or change the world into his own theoretical abstractions literally “dyed” or killed him.”

While Meanor’s interpretation seems to me, within its limits, correct, I feel that from the original context—grouchy hung-over arguments between the two members of a very witty married couple—some aspects and dimensions have been missed. Though Cheever’s hangover may be painful, I doubt it is fatal, or that the story is a genuine tragedy. Meanor does not register aspects, like the spilled soup, that to me seem wild slapstick humor. And, though Mallory in the end didn’t save his marriage through geometry, his good-natured effort and innocence seem to me to deserve more than scorn as a failure. Perhaps another try would bring success. Such ambiguity seems to me to fit better in the context of Cheever’s general theme: his “never-ending attempt to regenerate an Edenic condition of innocence and paradisiacal happiness, attainable only within the souls of his suffering, but hopeful, characters” [15, page *xiii*]. Since the hero dies attempting to improve, or at least cope with, reality by viewing it mathematically, there is now a genuine interpretive question: has he failed (since his attempt killed him), or (as mathematically inclined readers might think) did he do an intriguing, praiseworthy experiment that deserves to be followed up more carefully?

Acknowledgments. Thanks to Professor Scott Donaldson for his kind advice on the manuscript and copyright issues.

References

- [1] Bailey, Blake. 2009. *Cheever: A Life*. New York: Knopf.
- [2] Baym, Nina, *et al.* 1986. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Shorter, 2nd ed. New York: Norton.
- [3] Bell, E. T. 1937. *Men of Mathematics*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

- [4] Cheever, John. 2009. *Collected Stories and Other Writings* (chronology and notes by Blake Bailey). New York: Library of America-188.
- [5] Cheever, Mary. 1980. *The Need for Chocolate, and Other Poems*. New York: Stein and Day.
- [6] Cheever, Susan. 1984. *Home Before Dark*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- [7] Cheever, Susan. 1999. *Note Found in a Bottle: My Life as a Drinker*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- [8] Davy, Humphry. 1839. *The Collected Works of Sir Humphry Davy* (ed. John Davy), Vol. III. *Researches, Chiefly Concerning Nitrous Oxide*. London: Smith, Elder and Co. Cornhill. [Reprinting of the author's *Researches on Nitrous Oxide*, first published 1800; also available electronically at Google books.]
- [9] Donaldson, Scott. 1988. *John Cheever: A Biography*. New York: Random House.
- [10] Gough, John. 2008. "Diversions with John Gough." *Australian Mathematics Teacher*, **64**(1) (March) 12.
- [11] Hardy, Thomas. 1976. "I Look Into My Glass," in: *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy* (ed. James Gibson). New York: Macmillan, p. 81.
- [12] Kasman, Alex. *Mathematical Fiction*, online resource at <http://kasmana.people.cofc.edu/MATHFICT/>. The Cheever story is described at <http://kasmana.people.cofc.edu/MATHFICT/mfview.php?callnumber=mf119>, last accessed on January 23, 2020.
- [13] Leyda, Jan. 1960. *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [14] Marlowe, Christopher. 1933. *Tamburlaine the Great* (Part I). In: Hazelton Spencer, ed. *Elizabethan Plays*. Boston: D. C. Heath, pages 3-35.
- [15] Meanor, Patrick. 1995. *John Cheever Revisited* (Twayne's United States Authors Series, 647). New York: Twayne.
- [16] The New Yorker. 2005. *The Complete New Yorker DVD Collection*.

- [17] O'Hara, James E. 1989. *John Cheever: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne.
- [18] Pais, Abraham. 2006. *J. Robert Oppenheimer: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [19] Reid, Constance. 1970. *Hilbert*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- [20] Seligson, Marcia. 1989. "Portrait of a Man Reading." In [17, pages 109-113]. Reprinted from: *Washington Post Book World*, 9 March 1969, 2.
- [21] Snow, C. P. 1967. "Foreword," to: Hardy, G. H. *A Mathematician's Apology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [22] Waldeland, Lynne. 1979. *John Cheever* (Twayne's United States Authors Series, 335). Boston: Twayne (a division of G. K. Hall).